

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

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by the same author

SHAKESPEARE IS HARD, BUT SO IS LIFE

A TRAITOR'S KISS

WHITE SAVAGE

SHIP OF FOOLS

Enough is Enough
How to Build a New Republic

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to Sam, Fionn and the future

Acknowledgements

I had not intended to write this book. Its origins lie in public responses to a book I wrote in 2009 – *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger*. That polemical analysis of the factors that led to the destruction of Irish prosperity made readers angry – or perhaps it merely plugged in to an existing rage. In public readings and discussions, however, the expressions of fury, bewilderment and alienation inevitably led on to a single question – what do we do next?

I do not pretend to have anything like a full answer to that question. It did strike me, however, that it would be irresponsible to stir up anger and then walk away from the consequences. The discussions were marked, to a surprisingly large extent, by their avoidance of mere furious venting. The people I encountered were thoughtful, engaged and hungry for ideas. Whether or not this book adequately feeds that hunger, it owes its existence to them and I thank them for it.

The chapter ‘The Myth of the Republic’ expands on an essay first written for an RTE Thomas Davis lecture; I am grateful to the editor of that series, Mary Jones, for her inspiration. I am extremely grateful to everyone at Faber and Faber for their extraordinary efforts in making a book like this possible. Polemical interventions in a fluid political and economic crisis are not the normal business of one of the world’s great literary publishers. I am indebted to my editor Neil Belton for his unflinching support and to Charles Boyle and Kate Murray-Browne for their grace under pressure.

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‘Stupidity is doing the same things
and expecting different results’
– Roy Keane



PART ONE
Five Myths

The portly comedian Jo Brand has a joke that goes ‘I’m an anorexic. I must be anorexic because when I look in the mirror, I see a fat person.’ Brand’s quip captures a larger truth – you can look at yourself in the mirror. You can see an accurate reflection. But you can still draw the wrong conclusions.

Ireland since the crash is a bit like that. It is looking very hard in the mirror. The face that stares back is no longer the one that told us we were the fairest of them all. It is gaunt with anxiety, furrowed with despair and red with rage. But while this new image may be more accurate than the previous one, it is not necessarily more truthful. Switching from an inflated self-image to a miserably deflated one is not quite the same thing as getting a clear sense of who and where we are. What matters is how we interpret what we see. To do that in a way that opens up real possibilities for change, we first have to clear away some potent myths.

Self-delusion is not uncommon. As individuals, as communities and as nations, we cannot bear too much reality. Life is hard and would be even harder if we did not leaven it with myths, fantasies and impossible dreams. Societies are so complicated that, in order to hold them in our heads, we have to simplify them. Uncertainties are so abundant that, in order to keep going, we have to ignore them. Injustices are so

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raw that, in order not to be beaten down by them, we have to give them only sporadic attention. Ireland and the Irish do not, in this regard, fundamentally differ from anyone else.

If the existence of self-delusion in Ireland in the first decade of the twenty-first century was not unusual, however, the degree of collective misapprehension was rather extreme. Many people knew, from their bitter daily experiences of poverty, abandonment and squalor, that everything was not for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Some people said so, repeatedly. But such experiences and such voices were powerless against an overwhelming consensus that the bad days of Irish history were over and would never come back. The idea that Ireland had found salvation in its embrace of so-called free-market globalisation ceased to be an ideology and acquired the irrefutable authority of 'common sense'. However many warnings were given, however many reasons for deep unease, the shattering of the dream in September 2008 came as a genuine shock. It was as unexpected and as appalling as a natural disaster. So profound was the self-delusion, indeed, that most of the Irish political, administrative and media elite continued to believe that what had happened was an unfortunate, albeit grim, setback on the road to nirvana and that all that was needed in response were, in a phrase much used by the Taoiseach Brian Cowen, 'temporary adjustments'.

A consensus as powerful as this has to be based on assumptions nobody really thinks about because they are simply taken for granted. But if we start to examine those assumptions, they crumble. A new realism has to begin with the reality that the economic disaster has deep roots in Irish political and institutional culture. Nothing will change unless politics are reinvented. That reinvention begins with the realisation that five underlying 'truths' of Irish politics are not true at all.

I

The Myth of the Republic

The name ‘the Republic of Ireland’ trips off the tongue. No such place exists.

When he was asked during the Spanish Civil War to contribute to a set of statements by writers on the conflict, Samuel Beckett’s reply was typically laconic. Beckett’s response came on a card on which was printed simply UPTHEREPUBLIC! As a declaration of support for the Spanish republic in its fight against the military uprising led by General Franco, this could hardly be more straightforward and unambiguous. But at a more private level, the message also carried something else that was typical of Beckett, a sardonic irony. For one of the great Irishmen of the twentieth century, it was easier to declare support for a Spanish republic than for an Irish republic. By taking possession of an Irish slogan that had been used by both Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil, and that had little appeal for him, Beckett was making a joke on both himself and Ireland. He knew very well that in Ireland being a republican meant something quite different from what it meant in a broader European context. Beckett thus summarised in thirteen letters the strange situation of a country in which people who regarded themselves as republican might be at odds with the political realities of the republic itself.

The notion of republican democracy has deep roots in Irish

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political history and, after the 1916 Rising and its proclamation of an Irish republic, it became the emotional framework within which the Irish state emerged. The Irish Republic existed both as a goal that would be realised some day, when Ireland was united, and as a theoretical reality in the state that took shape between the early 1920s and the late 1940s. On the level of rhetoric, appeals to ‘the Republic established in 1916’ have always had a heady potency.

It is instructive, however, to consider what the putative founders of the Republic thought it should be. The first Dáil of January 1919 – the most representative parliament that had yet sat in Ireland – was the institutional heir to the would-be revolutionaries of 1916. It adopted the Democratic Programme, which is striking for the way it defines a republic not by what it *is* but by what it *does*. And what it does is overwhelmingly concerned with the treatment of the most vulnerable citizens – the young and the old.

In fewer than 600 words, the Democratic Programme sets out a number of principles, both theoretical and practical. It affirms that ‘all right to private property must be subordinated to the public right and welfare’. It sets down the governing ideals as ‘Liberty, Equality, and Justice for all’. It declares the right of every citizen to an ‘adequate share of the produce of the Nation’s labour’. Turning to the practical values of public policy, it boldly affirms that ‘It shall be the first duty of the Government of the Republic to make provision for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of the children, to secure that no child shall suffer hunger or cold from lack of food, clothing, or shelter’. And if the welfare of children is to come first, the second and third priorities will be care for the elderly and the creation of a decent health system:

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The Irish Republic fully realises the necessity of abolishing the present odious, degrading and foreign Poor Law System, substituting therefor a sympathetic native scheme for the care of the Nation's aged and infirm, who shall not be regarded as a burden, but rather entitled to the Nation's gratitude and consideration. Likewise it shall be the duty of the Republic to take such measures as will safeguard the health of the people and ensure the physical as well as the moral well-being of the Nation.¹

It is not accidental that the Democratic Programme was barely referred to again. (Politicians much preferred the vaguer, more grandiose rhetoric of the 1916 proclamation.) After Independence, the Programme's delineation of the defining characteristics of the Republic was a hideous embarrassment. In the real Ireland, private property almost always trumped the common good. Neither liberty, equality or justice for all was obvious in a society that imposed severe restrictions on private and intimate behaviour, that tolerated vicious poverty and that excluded and exported a huge proportion of its population. The Programme's belief that the welfare of children would be the first concern of Irish governments was grotesquely mocked in the hellish industrial school system in which 170,000 children (more than one child in every hundred) were incarcerated.² Even the 'odious, degrading and foreign' workhouses were left in place, albeit with the friendlier, more Irish name of 'county homes'. If what the framers of the Democratic Programme outlined is called a Republic, some other word entirely has to be invented for the state that actually emerged from their struggles.

Perhaps, in hindsight, it was never likely that a real republic would be born in the circumstance of early twentieth-century

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Ireland. Mainstream Irish nationalism paid little attention to Ulster Protestant identity (which it simply dismissed, in the words of the 1916 Proclamation, as ‘differences fostered by an alien government’ to which the Republic would be ‘oblivious’). That, in turn, made partition virtually inevitable. James Connolly’s prediction that partition would result in a ‘carnival of reaction, north and south’ proved to be all too accurate, with each of the post-partition entities defining itself through its majority religious and ethnic identity.

Equally, though, the South itself may have lacked the kind of civic culture from which a republic could grow. George Russell (AE), one of the guiding spirits behind the Co-Operative Movement, argued rather presciently in 1912 that a successful democratic state could be built only on the basis of a thriving culture of citizenship: ‘I understand and sympathise with the fixed passion of the politician for his theory of an Irish State, but I do not believe he will gain the results he hopes for unless his State is composed of people who may truly be called citizens.’ Russell suggested that ‘If we have in the country parishes of Ireland a host of unorganised peasant proprietors, each pushing a trivial agricultural business, each acting alone and never in union with his neighbours, the energy of self-interest in its lower forms will become the predominant energy, and this will overflow into rural and county councils, and we shall have frequent jobbery; and in the region of national politics we shall have the conflict of personalities, rather than the pursuit of public interests.’³ In spite of the valiant efforts of organisations like the Co-Operative Movement itself, Russell’s fears proved to be all too well-grounded. A society of peasant proprietors did not prove to be fertile ground for the growth of a republic.

Nevertheless, for well over half a century now, it has been

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normal for most people living in the twenty-six counties to say that they come from ‘the Republic’. It is telling, though, that even the use of this word to describe the state is mired in confusion and ambivalence. The constitution declares the name of the state to be Ireland or Eire. There is no mention of a republic. The Republic of Ireland Act of 1948 declares that ‘the description of the state shall be the Republic of Ireland’, but the constitution has never been amended along these lines. In bringing forward the Republic of Ireland Bill in 1948, the then Taoiseach John A. Costello explained that there would be a difference between what the state was called and what it was: ‘There is the name of the State and there is the description of the State. The name of the State is Ireland and the description of the State is the Republic of Ireland.’⁴

But even as a description, the Republic barely exists. The official government website nowhere refers to the Republic of Ireland or even states that Ireland is a republic. In the diplomatic sphere, while the Irish state has accepted credentials from ambassadors addressed to ‘Ireland’, the ‘Republic of Ireland’, or the name of the president, it will not accept credentials addressed to the ‘Irish Republic’ because this last term was the name used in the declaration of independence in 1919 and encompassed all thirty-two counties.

All of this has little effect on the view most of the state’s citizens take of their country, but the confusion is, in its own way, rather apt. If we’re not sure whether to call our state a republic or not, it’s partly because it is and it isn’t. In the sense in which most people use the word – a liberal democracy without a monarch – Ireland obviously is a republic. But a broader notion of republicanism raises basic questions about the reality of Ireland’s democracy. Using the definition articulated so powerfully in the work of Philip Pettit,⁵ we can

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ask whether Ireland is ‘a state that can operate effectively against private domination, helping to reduce the degree of domination people suffer at the hands of other individuals and groups . . . a state that is organised in such a way that it will not itself represent a source of domination in people’s lives . . . a state that is conducted for the public interest, that pursues its policies in the public eye, and that acts under public control – a state that is truly a *res publica*, a matter of public business’.

The short answer to those questions is ‘not really’. Far from operating against ‘private domination’, the Irish state has itself been run – with disastrous consequences – on behalf of private groups: bishops, professions, banks, developers. It has often been a source of domination in people’s lives, especially when it operated to enforce the official morality of the Catholic church and incarcerated children and women in industrial schools and Magdalen homes. It has not been conducted in the public interest – tolerance for political and business corruption has permitted the state to be hijacked for private gain. It has not operated in the public eye – transparency and accountability have been obvious mostly by their absence. And it is not under public control – decisions of immense import, such as the bailout of the banking system, have been pushed through with very little public support.

The creation of a republic in Pettit’s deeper sense isn’t a matter of reading a declaration outside the General Post Office or even of enacting a constitution. It is a process that unfolds over time and that has to be renewed constantly, creatively, and with passion. In the Irish case, that process has been hampered by a number of powerful forces. All of them are reasonably obvious but because they come from different directions, their cumulative effect has been hard to define.

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What they have in common is the way they have imposed limits on the emergence of a republican democracy in which public business is conducted openly, fairly, and in the public interest.

One set of limits was imposed by the overwhelmingly Catholic nature of the State established after partition. The Catholic Church didn't just enjoy the spiritual allegiance of a large majority of the population. It was also a major temporal power, with direct control over large elements of what would be regarded as the public realm in other democracies. The health and education systems were church-dominated. Specifically Catholic teaching was embodied in law in a number of areas, mostly those that related to sexuality, reproduction and marriage. So, while the state was far from the simple theocracy of caricature, it was unquestionably subject to a huge degree of direct and indirect Church influence. Practically all politicians accepted this influence as right and proper. In presenting his new constitution in 1937, Eamon de Valera proclaimed bluntly that it would present Ireland to the world 'as a Catholic nation'.

This attitude was echoed and even enhanced by the other political parties. When it took office in 1948, the Inter-Party coalition government immediately sent a message of homage to Pope Pius XII expressing its 'desire to repose at the feet of Your Holiness the assurance of our filial loyalty and our devotion to your August Person, as well as our firm resolve to be guided in all our work by the teachings of Christ and to strive for the attainment of a social order in Ireland based on Christian principles'.⁶

The effects of this subordination of state policy to Church teaching on the individual freedoms that citizens might expect in a republic were obvious. It is also worth noting, however,

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that these notions of ‘filial loyalty’, in which the Church was the stern but loving father and the state the faithful and obedient son, gave free rein to an aristocratic imagery that was, on the face of it, at odds with republican notions of civic and political equality. Having shrugged off one culture of deference to titled nobles, the new state embraced another. The elected representatives of the people always kneeled before a bishop and kissed his ring. The fact that the bishop was addressed as ‘My Lord’ and lived in a house that was always called a ‘palace’ did not seem to cause any great discomfort to Irish people who would have been enraged by any suggestion that Ireland should honour an aristocracy.

Indeed, Mary Kenny has argued persuasively that the Church occupied the place where the monarchy had been: ‘even the ardent Republicans would find a vehicle for the pomp and ceremony that every society either derives from tradition or reinvents – the Holy Roman Catholic Church would soon fill the vacuum left by the departed pageantry of His Majesty.’⁷ She points out that the Eucharistic Congress of 1932, which was the Irish state’s first great public ceremonial, ‘followed in almost every detail the format used for royal visits and royal events in Ireland . . . Not coincidentally, words and phrases previously applied to the monarchy were attached to the papacy: “allegiance”, “loyalty”, and “kingship” (of Christ).’ The ‘parallel monarchy’ of the Church preserved all the habits of awe, obedience and humility that might have been thrown off in a genuinely democratic revolution.

That deference is well and truly gone, and the political power of the Church collapsed with remarkable rapidity in the 1990s. But it has left behind a problematic legacy of Church control in crucial areas of education and health. The real problem with Church dominance of public services in

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a democracy is that the Church itself is, explicitly and emphatically, not a democracy. It is a hierarchical organisation in which decisions come from the top down. Ideas of openness, transparency and accountability are largely irrelevant to the way it operates. And while that may not be a problem for citizens in their spiritual lives, it becomes a very severe problem indeed when key parts of the state, especially in its health and education systems, are effectively controlled by the Church.

The most extreme manifestation of this problem in recent years has been the way Church authorities dealt with revelations of child abuse by priests, brothers and nuns by seeing these basic issues of human rights and legality as essentially internal matters governed by canon law and the short-term interests of the institution. But there is also a less dramatic, if no less corrosive, conflict between, on the one hand, republican notions of the equal entitlement of citizens to public goods, and, on the other, the persistence of private church power in the provision of those goods. It is by no means an irresolvable conflict but it is one that needs to be recognised in an increasingly diverse and pluralist society.

The second obvious set of limitations on the emergence of a republic in Ireland has been the way the very notion of republicanism, which ought to act as a bulwark against private domination, has instead been an instrument of private domination. The language of Irish political discourse, in which a 'republican' meant someone associated with or supportive of the IRA, expresses this paradox. The existence throughout the history of the state of a secret and self-appointed cabal, accountable to no one but itself yet claiming to act on behalf of the Irish Republic, has tended to discredit the idea of republicanism. It has brought a mixture of tragedy and farce to

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any discussion of the subject. When a secret body claims to be 'the Government of Ireland', as the IRA Army Council always did, the whole notion of popular sovereignty is thrown into comic absurdity. When it then goes on to claim the right to use extreme violence on behalf of the people, that notion is fouled with blood and madness.

Less directly, the ideology of this kind of republicanism has had a broader effect on political life in the twenty-six counties. It interacted with mainstream political nationalism to create the feeling that the Irish state was a temporary arrangement, at best a mere way-station on the road to the true Republic of a United Ireland that would emerge at some time in the future. In the 1980s the former Taoiseach Charles Haughey remarked that 'When I talk about my Ireland I am talking about something that is not yet a complete reality. It is a dream that has not yet been fulfilled.' This feeling that the state was unreal, dream-like and incomplete was rooted in the political rhetoric that defined the republic as the entity declared in 1916 but never actually created. The ambivalence of much of the political class about the state it governed added to the feeling that a real republic was, in a sense, an impossible concept, relegated to the realm of aspirations, and therefore beyond the reach of practical politics.

The third longstanding limitation on the process of creating an Irish republic is corruption. If, in Pettit's phrase, a republic is a 'state that is conducted for the public interest', then corruption is the antithesis of republicanism. Political corruption is the subordination of the public interest to private interest. Its purpose is mirrored in its means of operation: it is carried out beyond public scrutiny, as a set of private understandings. But it also requires a corrosion of the idea of the public interest itself. Political decisions that

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are made for private reasons – to favour those who have favoured the politician – have to be justified by reference to an invented set of public policies. This is a wider process, and one that has in some cases drawn the institutions of the state – including the Oireachtas, the justice system, the Revenue Commissioners and the civil service – into unknowing collusion with corruption.

The natural corollary of corruption is cynicism. Republics run on trust – a fuel that dried up a long time ago in Ireland. It is generally held that the disillusionment with democracy that became evident in the low turnouts in elections in the 1990s was caused by the revelations of the various tribunals of inquiry in political scandals. But it is worth remembering that long before the Irish political landscape was dominated by tribunals of inquiry, Irish people understood quite well that they lived in a democracy where influence and power could be bought. The idea of ‘pull’, where jobs, grants and state services were assumed to be subject to the rule that ‘It’s not what you know but who you know’, was pervasive in Irish life. Most people probably saw the doings of their political masters as simply a larger version of this general rule.

It’s also worth looking back on an MRBI poll conducted for an RTE *Today Tonight* programme in November 1991. To the proposition that ‘there is a Golden Circle of people in Ireland who are using power to make money for themselves’, a massive 89 per cent agreed. Eighty-one per cent agreed that the people in this Golden Circle were made up in equal measure of business people and politicians. Seventy-six per cent thought the scandals that were then beginning to emerge ‘part and parcel’ of the Irish economic system rather than one-off events. Eighty-three per cent thought that the then current scandals were merely ‘the tip of the iceberg’, while

84 per cent said business people involved in corrupt dealings and fraud got off more lightly than other criminals.

These assumptions pre-date the tribunals and they remind us of how little Irish people actually believed themselves to be living in a republic where the public interest was protected and all citizens interacted with the state as equals. Corruption, in this sense, was not a cloak-and-dagger affair, but a vivid pattern in the fabric of public life. Much of the political and business elite involved in the Ansbacher tax evasion scheme were shaping the world that Irish people live in, not just metaphorically but literally. Meanwhile, the abuse of non-resident accounts for tax evasion was an open secret throughout the banking industry in the 1980s and 1990s.

The mixture of political corruption and conservative ideology that created and sustained this culture of tax evasion had huge long-term effects. It encouraged large sections of the Irish business class to salt away its disposable capital in unproductive offshore or bogus non-resident accounts rather than to invest it productively. It contributed to a fiscal crisis in which there was no option but to slash state spending on social programmes. This in turn meant that those who needed help were left to fend for themselves while those who had money were able to improve their relative position in society. While ordinary working people were paying tax at up to 60 per cent, many people with considerable resources were able to avail themselves of amnesties at a rate of 15 per cent or to evade tax altogether. When the boom came, the rich were in an even better position to benefit from it.

What became ever more apparent as the years went on and the revelations from the tribunals continued to unfold was that the ideal of the republic hadn't just slipped away in a process of economic and social change or been stolen from

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us by perfidious Albion. It had been deliberately and cynically betrayed from within. Some people at the very top of the heap had owed more loyalty to the Cayman Islands than to Ireland. Some citizens blessed with resources had turned themselves into ‘bogus non-residents’, here but not here, part of Ireland when the goodies were being given out but mysteriously vanishing into a virtual exile when the obligations of citizenship were to be met.

The last set of limits to the emergence of a republic was the growth of the notion that the state apparatus is an entity in itself, with interests of its own that are not necessarily the same as the public interest. This is not the kind of thing that gets stated explicitly, but it has hovered around some of the political controversies of the last twenty years. It popped up in the Tribunal of Inquiry into the Beef Processing Industry in 1991 when the then Attorney General stated that his role at the inquiry was to represent not the public interest but the state. It arose in the traumatic controversy over the infection of hundreds of women with hepatitis C by a state agency, the Blood Transfusion Service Board, when the state ended up fighting a dying woman, Brigid McCole, in court as if the state and a wronged citizen were somehow natural enemies. It ran through a series of court cases in the 1990s in which the parents of disabled children tried to get an appropriate education for their children. In those cases, the state sought to establish once and for all that citizens have only such rights as the state is willing to grant them. This notion is based on the profound belief that the state is an entity up there, above and beyond the people, with a life and a will all of its own.

The last twenty years or so has been a period in which some of these underlying limitations on the emergence of an Irish republic have been rolled back, while other problems

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have emerged. On the positive side of the equation, the shrinking of the political power of the Church to the kind of scale it ought to have in a democratic republic has opened up the possibility of a pluralist culture in which the idea of shared civic values is at least up for discussion. The Northern Ireland peace process and the gradual dismantling of paramilitarism has created the opportunity for republicanism to be taken back from the gunmen. The tribunals and inquiries, problematic and ultimately ineffective as they were, at least shone a retrospective light onto the nature of the relationship between business and politics. The growing influence of European legislation has, in many cases, had a healthy effect on governance, making, for example, tendering for public projects more open. Inward migration has created a more culturally diverse society, one in which common civic values are more obviously necessary.

All of these processes are radically incomplete, however. The groundswell of change that gathered in the early 1990s either stalled or receded during the hysterical boom years. What could be so wrong with a state that was so spectacularly producing the goods – and not just any goods either but the glitziest of designer bling? In spite of large-scale inward migration and the growth of cultural and religious diversity, democratic control over the health and education systems was barely discussed. The peace process lost momentum and became mired in ambivalence. The revelations about corruption and tax evasion lost their impact through weariness, cynicism, and the culture of impunity that ensured that few of those who were exposed suffered any great penalty.

As this cynicism took hold, the public lost its sense of outrage and became resigned to a political culture it despised. In the early 1990s there had been a broad sense that political re-

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form was an urgent necessity. For a time, no politician could utter a sentence that did not contain the words ‘openness’, ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’, which were in such general use that they were boiled down to an acronym, OTA.

OTA gave us three pieces of legislation – the Ethics in Public Office Act, the Freedom of Information Act and the Electoral Act. Their purposes were, respectively, to set standards of behaviour for politicians; to ensure that government would be done, as the then Taoiseach Albert Reynolds put it, ‘behind a pane of glass’; and to break the influence of big-money donors over political parties.

But like grunge, leggings and scrunchies, OTA was a 1990s fad. Once the economy started to lift off, there was a collective loss of interest in the idea of good government. One by one, the three pillars of OTA were allowed to crumble.

The ethics legislation turned out to be as toothless as a gummy frog. There were occasional feather-dustings for small fry. (Fianna Fáil TD Denis Foley’s Ansbacher account, for example, resulted in a two-week suspension from the Dáil – in effect a paid holiday.) When it really mattered, with the revelation that the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, was on the take and could not produce a tax clearance certificate, the legislation was a beaten docket. The Standards in Public Office Commission made a terse announcement in September 2007, in relation to Bertie’s dig-outs, that ‘there is no basis on which to initiate an investigation’. That put the Ethics Act out of its misery.

The Freedom of Information Act, on the other hand, was deliberately sabotaged. Charlie McCreevy, then Minister for Finance, gutted it in 2003. ‘Government papers’ – the definition of which was extended – were excluded from the legislation for ten years after they were prepared. The number

and type of official documents that could be excluded from the workings of the Act were extended to cover, for example, briefing materials prepared by departments for ministers who were about to answer parliamentary questions. (It would no longer be possible to discover what a minister might have said if she or he had been asked the right follow-up question.) Charges for access to information were greatly increased. The justification for these changes was summed up by the then Fianna Fáil senator Martin Mansergh as the necessity ‘to balance the need for good government . . . with the right to freedom of information’.⁸ The idea that transparency might not actually be inimical to good government, but essential to it, had been abandoned.

What was most significant was the complete lack of public response. Journalists and campaigning groups complained, but no one, almost literally, wanted to know. The citizenry as a whole simply gave up without a fight a right it had acquired in response to the corruption scandals of the 1990s.

And the third piece of reforming legislation, the Electoral Act, proved – for reasons that will be detailed in a later chapter – to be utterly ineffective as a means of breaking the link between money and politics. If anything, it merely added to cynicism about the nature of those links.

Most crucially of all, the limits of republicanism itself were painfully exposed during the boom years. Being a republic is not, in itself, a guarantee of social justice or even of basic decency. The theoretical equality of citizens did not prevent the classical republic of the United States of America consigning both African and native Americans to inferiority and oppression. The rhetoric of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity did not apply to France’s colonial adventures or to its internal rages of anti-Semitism and racism. Republican ideals of

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openness and the public interest have not been the most obvious features of the life of the modern Italian republic. As the framers of the Democratic Programme in 1919 understood, a republic has to be measured by what it does rather than by what it says it is.

The great weakness of republican thinking has always been its struggle to connect a notion of political equality in which each citizen has the same weight in the determination of the public good, with the reality of economic inequality in which some citizens obviously carry more weight than others. The founding father of Irish republicanism, Theobald Wolfe Tone, wrote that ‘True republicans fight only to vindicate the rights of equality and detest ever the name of a Master.’ But the rich are always more equal than the poor and mastery will always be available to those who can mobilise a grossly disproportionate set of resources. Access to, or even control of, the media; the ability to exert economic pressure; the power to threaten dire consequences – all of these can determine the actions of the state at least as much as the votes of the electorate do. Republican democracy has to be given a content that goes beyond the nature of political institutions, and that content has to centre on equality. In the boom years, however, the political system – and to some extent public attitudes – were dominated by the idea that inequality was a necessary (and therefore implicitly desirable) condition for the creation of wealth.

For all these challenges, however, the republic is still an ideal that can frame the search for a public morality in a despairing Ireland. What makes it indispensable is that it addresses the great problem of, on the one hand, having a nation state that is the focus of collective identity and, on the other, the tendency of such identities to become exclusive,

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static and smug. For much of the last twenty years, it was possible to imagine that this problem would eventually go away because the nation state itself would disappear into regional and global institutions like the European Union. With the banking crisis, however, that illusion has been shattered. The state is back with a bang – as the entity that has to both underpin all economic activity and pick up the pieces when everything falls apart. We need nation states but, in a globalised culture, we need them to be based on much more than nationalism. We need them to be republics in Pettit’s sense – able to define and underpin a common public interest and working against domination by particular interests, not themselves becoming sources of domination. Even if the idea of an Irish republic had not existed before, we would have to invent it now.

That idea still contains many of the things that people at the start of the twentieth century, about to embark on the painful process of inventing a modern nation, wanted from it: a sense of justice, a feeling of belonging, a commitment to protecting the weak and vulnerable, a capacity to be proud of ourselves, a notion, however vague, that there was an ‘ourselves’ to be proud of.

The precise content of that notion was hard to pin down back then, but it was later made concrete and tangible by its obvious absence. In an odd way, all of the revelations and disasters of the last two decades, by pointing up the absence of a public community of which Irish people could be proud, served to remind them that they still wanted one. The joys of shopping, however enthusiastically embraced, didn’t quite fill the hole where a society called ‘Ireland’ should be. Retail therapy didn’t quite assuage the anguish of finding ourselves, at the start of a new century, right back where we had started

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the old one, in an unsettled, fluid and desperately troubled place that needed to be re-invented as a republic.

It is striking that, as the scale of the economic and banking crisis became clear in the last two years, many people (including the present author) independently reached for the idea of the Second Republic. It was meant to convey the idea of a need to begin again, to build as if from scratch, a set of public and political institutions worthy of the allegiance of the Irish people. On reflection, however, the concept had one obvious flaw. How could there be a second republic when there was no first republic? The task is not to rediscover or reinvent a lost republic. It is to build something we have never had.